

NEWS from the T&I DEMOCRATS

Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, Democratic Caucus

U.S. House of Representatives, 2163 Rayburn HOB, Washington, DC 20515

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Dems Name 3 to Amtrak Working Group Oberstar questions subcommittee bypass

WASHINGTON—Three Democratic Members of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee will sit on a special working group formed by Chairman Young to analyze the findings of a new Government Accountability Office study on Amtrak's operations. At the same time, the Ranking Democrat on the Committee is questioning the need for creating such a group.

Rep. Elijah E. Cummings of Maryland will lead the Democrats on the working group. He will be joined by Reps. Jerrold Nadler (NY) and Brian Baird (Wash.)

"I don't understand why we need a special working group to study this report when we already have a Subcommittee on Railroads," said Rep. James L. Oberstar, Ranking Democratic Member on the full Committee. "Such tasks are best handled in regular order under the existing structure of the Committee."

Among the findings of the GAO report (*Amtrak Management: Systemic Problems Require Actions to Improve Efficiency, Effectiveness, and Accountability*), released today, was that Amtrak's management was lax in strategic planning and maintaining proper records. The report also presents rebuttal testimony from Amtrak president David Gunn, who said the investigation focused too heavily on process and not enough on results.

The report held up VIA Rail Canada's missions and goals as a model for Amtrak to follow. Yet, the Canadian railroad's mission statement and corporate objectives reflect intuitive goals for any rail service and obvious to any railroad worker. For example, the VIA Rail Mission Statement reads, "Working together to consistently deliver safe, efficient, and environmentally responsible services for travelers in Canada."

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“In the area of strategic planning, I believe that we have identified the problems, as only we can, and have developed an approach that works best for us and where tangible progress has been made,” Gunn said in response. “To me, while process is important, results are what matter.”

The report also predicts that Amtrak’s losses will increase by some \$400 million over the next four years. However, this projection is based on the assumption that Amtrak’s current operating costs will continue unchanged. In fact, Amtrak says it is putting in place new procedures that will allow the railroad to operate more efficiently, reduce costs and mitigate the projected losses.

“While this report is critical of some parts of Amtrak’s operation, it is hardly damning,” said Oberstar. “It falls well short of the extraordinary circumstances that would call for bypassing a standing subcommittee in favor of an ad hoc study group.”

Oberstar said that part of the working group’s charge is to determine if the Committee should create a formal Task Force to study further the issues raised by the report.

“Committee Task Forces are best used in cases that do not easily fit into the jurisdiction of an existing subcommittee or cross subcommittee jurisdictional lines,” Oberstar said. “That is clearly not the case here.”

Despite these reservations, Oberstar appointed Cummings, Nadler, and Baird to the working group to make sure that the GAO report is thoroughly and fairly vetted.

“I am confident that Rep. Cummings and the others will bring experience and reason to the working group’s deliberations,” Oberstar said.

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